Object Oriented Finite Element Modeling*

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July 28, 2009

Key words: Finite Element Modeling, Object Oriented Analysis

Abstract

This paper presents a general structure of an object oriented finite element code. The aim of the described object oriented environment is not only to be an efficient and robust tool for FEM computations, but also to provide a modular and extensible tool for new developments. The program structure has been designed to meet all natural requirements for modularity, extensibility, and robustness. Special attention is put on the description of the representations and interfaces of the material model and the analysis module. For reader convenience, a short introduction to Object Oriented Analysis is given. The program structure design presented has been successfully implemented.

1 Introduction

During the last decades engineering community has been facing a rapid development in many related fields. Also the recent progress in computer technology allows the practical use of many advanced, complex, and large FE models. Due to these facts, the necessity for a suitable FEM computation environment is evident. An analyst or researcher naturally wants to work with code which is easily extensible towards future demands, easily maintainable, but still efficient and portable across many platforms.

Generally, there are two main groups of existing programs. The first group consists of commercial products available on the market. These codes are offering wide functionality including many different analysis procedures, wide element libraries and are often provided with pre- and post- processing tools. Despite these facts, these packages are designated mainly to end users in design offices, providing excellent tools for standard types of analyses. The main disadvantage is their very limited or

*When referencing this paper, please cite the following: Patzák, B.: *Object oriented finite element modeling*, ACTA POLYTECHNICA, 39(2/1999):99-113, 1999. ISSN 1210-2709 even impossible extensibility. Usually a set of user defined subroutines is provided. By using these subroutines, the addition of a new element type or the introduction of a new constitutive laws is theoretically possible. Nevertheless, the extension to a new analysis type or the extension to a principally new material model with required history variables can be hardly possible. Therefore, these programs are oriented towards practical computations, rather than to the research engineering community. The second group of available programs is represented by programs distributed with source codes. In-house programs as well as many free- and share-ware programs were analysed and tested to determine whether they fulfilled required needs. They usually proved to be entirely inmodular or very poorly modular. Extensibility, primarily of interest to a researcher, is enabled due to existence of source code, but it is extremely time consuming and error prone due to unclear data structure or bad program design. This is further complicated by missing or insufficient documentation. Also, as a consequence of poor modularity, the distributed software development within a team is hardly possible.

Due to the aforementioned facts, a new general FEM kernel has been designed and developed with several modules being built on its top. The kernel provides the basic common services and data structures. Particular modules are designed to implement analysis specific parts by extending and specializing the basic kernel structure represented by its services and data structures. The module must provide problem formulation, numerical algorithms, finite elements and other necessary components for a specific analysis. At the very beginning, the following project goals were formulated:

- The most important requirement from the research community point of view, was to achieve an open nature of the kernel library - extensibility in a broad sense. The kernel has to be extensible in any "direction". Thus the possibility of adding new element types, new material models with any type and number of internal history variables, new boundary conditions or new analysis modules, must be a matter of course.
- The program structure must comply with a modular design. This is a very important feature to support team work.
- The code must be easily modifiable and maintainable. The important and natural requirement for a program is its portability over available and future platforms.
- Although extensibility and easy maintenance were of primary concern, the last but not least item — the efficiency is also a very important property, mainly from the viewpoint of the end user. We expected to obtain computational performance similar to programs written in Fortran or C. The minor decrease in speed is not important, if we realize the progress in computer hardware technology.

2 Object Oriented Analysis

A short outline of Object Oriented Analysis (OOA) will be given here, to help the reader to understand the basic principles of the subject. The basic terms and principles necessary for understanding of program structure, used later in this paper, will be mentioned and explained. Object Oriented Analysis is based on the uniform application of principles for managing complexity (see Ref. [1]).

- Abstraction (Procedural and data abstraction): The principle of ignoring those aspects of a subject that are not relevant to the current purpose in order to concentrate more on those that are relevant.
- Procedural abstraction: The principle that any operation that achieves a well defined effect can be treated by its users as a single entity, despite the fact that the operation may be actually achieved by some sequence of low level operations. Procedural abstraction is widely supported by existing programming languages; procedures and functions are examples of procedural abstraction.
- Data abstraction: The principle of defining a new data type in terms of the operations that apply to an object of that type, with the constraint that the values of such an object can be modified and observed only by the use of the operations. When applying data abstraction, an analyst must define attributes and services that exclusively manipulate these attributes. The only way, to get an attribute is via these services.
- Inheritance: The mechanism for expressing similarity between data types, making common attributes and services explicit within a class hierarchy. Inheritance allows an analyst to define common attributes and services only once, as well as to specialize and extend those attributes and services into specific derived classes. It expresses generalization specialization between data types.
- Association: Expresses the relationship, the state of being associated.
- Communication with messages: Models the processing dependency. It represents the need for services necessary to fulfill object responsibility.

In an overall approach, OOA consists of five major activities: finding classes and objects, identifying structures, identifying subjects, defining attributes, and defining services. In order to present the general structure of a developed program, a graphical form will be used. Particularly, the Coad-Yourdon methodology will be used (see Ref. [1]). It introduces the following basic elements and mutual relations between them (see Fig. 1.):

- An *Object* is an abstraction of something in a problem domain, reflecting the capabilities of a system to keep information about it, interact with it, or both. It is also an encapsulation of attribute values and their exclusive services. A Synonym for object is an instance.
- *Class*: A description of one or more objects with a uniform set of attributes and services, including a description of how to create a new object in a class.
- *Class & object*: A term meaning class and the objects in that class.
- *Attributes* describe the values (state) of the object, to be exclusively manipulated by the services of that object. The attributes and exclusive services on those attributes are assumed as an intrinsic whole. If another part of a system (another object) needs to access or otherwise manipulate the values in an object, it must do so by specifying a message connection corresponding to service defined for that object.
- *Services*: The central issue in defining services is to define required behavior and necessary communication.

- Generalization specialization structure may be viewed as a layout for distinguishing between classes. Less formally, a *Genspec* structure can be thought to be an expression for “is a” or “is a kind of” relation. Within a Genspec structure inheritance applies. An example is the generalization class **Vehicle** and specialization class **Truck vehicle**. Genspec structure is represented by generalization class and by specialization class with a line drawn between them. A semi-circle mark distinguishes classes as forming Genspec structure. The notation is directional — it uses a line drawn outward from semi-circle midpoint to point to the generalization (see Fig. 1.).
- *Whole part structure* groups together class&objects based upon whole-part meaning. This structure is represented by a whole object and by a part object, with a line drawn between them. A triangle mark distinguishes the object as forming the whole part structure. The notation is again directional. Each end of whole part structure line is marked with amount or range, indicating the number of parts that the whole may have and vice versa, at any given moment in time. The alternative modeling is to use an instance connection. It is weaker in meaning, but it still captures the mapping (see Fig. 1.).
- Attributes depict the object state. Instance connections add to this information, which required mappings are needed by an object to fulfill its responsibilities. Instance connections model association. A connection is represented by a line drawn between objects. Each object can again have an amount or range marks on each of its instance connections, reflecting constraints with other objects.
- A message connection is a mapping of one object to another (or occasionally to a class, to create a new object), in which a sender sends a message to a receiver, to get some processing done. The needed processing is named in the sender’s service specification, and is defined in the receiver’s service specification. The benefit of such a discipline is that it creates a very narrow interface between the strong encapsulation and exclusive services on those data. In effect, a message connection combines event-response and data flow perspectives. Each message represents values sent within the context of particular service need, and a response received as result.

3 General Structure

General structure is shown in Fig. 2. First focus attention on the class & object **Domain**. Generally speaking, it contains the problem description, or if the program runs in parallel, then it contains the description of the domain associated with a particular processor or thread of execution. **Domain** contains and manages lists of degree of freedom (DOF) managers, elements, boundary conditions, cross sections, and materials - these describe the geometry of problem, its constitutive properties, and applied boundary conditions. Services for accessing each of these objects are provided. **Domain** class & object contains also several **Engineering model**s. These objects represent the type of analysis, which may be invoked. **Domain** class & object provides services for reading input files, and instantiating corresponding components accordingly. **Domain**, after reading problem description and performing necessary consistency checks, starts computation by sending appropriate message to **Engng model**.

Engng model and Numerical method interfaces, shown schematically in top-left frame, will be explained in section 4 The classes & objects in the left-bottom frame represent the element, material model, and cross section abstractions. Because of their principal importance, a special section 5 will be devoted to a detailed explanation of this frame.

DOF is an abstraction for a single degree of freedom (DOF). It maintains its physical meaning and associated equation number. **DOF** is the attribute of one **DofManager**. The **DofManager** manages the collection of DOFs. A typical derived class is class **Node**, representing a node in a finite element mesh. **Boundary condition** and **Initial condition** are abstractions of boundary and initial conditions. They are attributes of **Domain** and are associated with one or more **DOF**s. The abstract class **Load**, derived from base **Boundary condition** class, is an abstraction for load. It is an attribute of **Domain** and can be associated with several dof managers or elements, according to the type. The class declares the basic services provided by all derived classes. Derived classes declare specific load type dependent services and implement all necessary services.

4 Engineering model — Numerical Method Interface

Engng model is an abstraction for the type of analysis, that will be done. Base class offers basic general services for assembling characteristic components and services for starting the solution step and its termination. Derived classes "know" the form of governing equation and the physical meaning of particular components. They are responsible for forming the governing equation for each solution step, which may represent either a time step, a load increment, or a load case, usually by summing contributions from particular elements and nodes. In order to solve the governing equation, a suitable instance of **Numerical Method** class is created. **Engng model** may use different numerical methods, depending, for example, on problem size or previous convergence. **Engng model** first maps its components of the governing equation (for example stiffness matrix, load vector) to corresponding numerical components (LHS, RHS), and then sends a message to the appropriate numerical method to solve the problem (see Fig. 4). **Engng model** must also provide services for updating its components, if this is necessary. These are used, when the **Numerical Method** instance needs to update some components during solution (for example in the Newton Raphson algorithm for the solution of non-linear equations, stiffness has to be updated after each iteration). Similarly, a high-level numerical method may use the services of another low-level numerical method (solver for non-linear system of equations uses another linear solver for linearized problem). **Numerical method** instance may also represent an interface to some procedure in C or Fortran (see Fig. 4.).

One important aspect, which should be mentioned here, is that all numerical methods solving the same problem use the same names for numerical components. This is important, because the situation, where different numerical methods use different message names and parameter ordering for the same service is avoided. This is necessary, otherwise any future introduction of numerical method could require some necessary code changes. However, by using the proposed compulsory mapping of each component separately to compulsory (and common) component names, it is possible to create a new instance of **Numerical method**, and leaving the whole engineering model code including mapping unchanged.

This concept is further enhanced by introduction of base abstract class for all sparse matrices. This class only declares the basic required services provided by all sparse matrices (like multiplication by a vector, possible factorization, etc). The implementation is left on derived classes. Numerical methods are then implemented only using basic services declared by **Sparse Matrix** class. Thus, numerical methods class instances will work with any sparse matrix class, even those added in the future, without changing any code, because all derived classes of **Sparse Matrix** class implement the same interface.

4.1 Program & Data Flow

The program flow in the engineering model — numerical method frame is explained in Fig. 3. After **Domain** reads the input file with the problem description, it starts computation by invoking *SolveYourself* service of **Engng model** class. In this example a non-linear static problem analysis is performed. The corresponding **Engng model** class solves the whole problem as a series of load increments. Therefore, for each step of computation, a *SolveYourselfAt* service is invoked. For the first step, the reference load vector is formed from element and nodal contributions, so these components are accessed from corresponding domain using its services. Then, for each solution step, the stiffness matrix is formed and particular components of the governing equation are mapped to the numerical method components. Here, an **CALM** instance of **Numerical Method** class is being used. For solution of a linearized problem, the **CALM** uses another instance of **Numerical method** class - here named **Linear solver**. After components are mapped and a solution is obtained, the **CALM** checks convergence. It asks **Engng model** to compute (update) the vector of real nodal forces according to the solution reached, and checks convergence. If convergence is reached, the program control returns to **Engng model** and the solution step is then terminated (stress updates and necessary printing) and the solution continues with next step. If prescribed accuracy is not reached, the stiffness matrix can be updated by suitable engng model service and iteration continues.

To summarise, the natural independence of problem formulation, numerical solution of problem, and data storage format have been obtained, which leads to a modular and extensible structure of the engineering model - numerical method frame.

5 Material — Element Frame

As already mentioned, in Fig. 2 the material-element frame is schematically shown. In this frame the following base classes & objects are introduced:

- Class **Element**, which is the abstraction of a finite element. It declares common general services, provided by all elements. Derived classes are the base classes for specific analysis types (structural analysis, thermal analysis). They declare and implement necessary services for specific analysis.
- **Integration point** class & object: It is an abstraction for the integration point of the finite element. It maintains its coordinates and

integration weight. Any integration point can generally contain any number of other integration points - called slaves. An **Integration point** containing slaves is called master. Slaves are, for example, introduced by a layered cross section model, where they represent integration points for each layer, or can be introduced at material model level, where they may represent, for example, microplanes. Slave integration points are hidden from elements. **Integration point** also contains associated material status (the reasons for introducing this feature will be explained later).

- **Cross section** class is an abstraction for cross section. Its main role is to hide from an element all details concerning cross section description and implementation. By cross section description we mean for example an integral cross section model, layered cross section model or fibered model. **Elements** do not communicate directly with material, instead they always use **Cross Section** interface, which performs all necessary integration over its volume and invokes necessary material class services. **Cross section** interface, defined in terms of general functions, allows the use of any cross section model, even those added in the future, without modification of any code, because all cross section models implement the same interface.

- **Material** class is shown here. It represents base class for all constitutive models. Derived classes should be the base analysis-specific classes, which declare required analysis specific services (for example structural material class declares services for stiffness computation and services for real stress evaluation). Again, the material analysis specific interface, defined in terms of general services, allows the use of any material model, even those added in the future, without modifying any code, because all material models implement the same interface.

One of the most important goals, which have been formulated, is extensibility. In the case of extension of the material library, the analyst is facing a key problem. Every material model must store its unique history parameters for every related integration point. The amount, type, and meaning of these history variables vary for each material model. Therefore, it is not possible to efficiently match all needs and reflect them in integration point data structure. The suggested remedy is following:

Integration point class is equipped with the possibility to have associated **Material status** class. When a new material model is implemented, the analyst has also to declare and implement a related material status derived from base **Material status** class to this material model. This status contains all necessary history variables and data access and modification services. **Integration point** provides services for inserting and accessing its related status. For every **Integration point**, corresponding material creates unique copy of its related material status and associates it with that integration point. Because **Integration point** is a compulsory parameter of all messages sent to **Material model** objects, a particular material model can access its related **Material status** from given **Integration point**, and therefore can access its history variables.

In the Fig. 5, the material - element frame is depicted in more detail, although it is still simplified. There is indicated simple cross section model class hierarchy. There are two derived classes from the parent **Cross Section** class: **Simple cross section** class representing an integral cross section model and **Layered cross section model** class, representing a layered cross section model implementation. At the bottom are indicated the hierarchies of material model and associated material status representations. The program flow for an element, requesting the computation of its real nodal forces is also indicated in Fig. 5. This is generally done by integrating real stresses at its integration points. For each **Integration point** it asks **Cross section** model to compute real stresses at given integration point. In this example, **Layered cross section** uses the master-slave integration point principle. Each element integration point, here called master, contains its slaves, each representing one layer. These slave integration points are introduced by the cross section model, and are hidden to the element. For a given master integration point, the cross section model performs integration over cross section volume using slaves. Therefore each slave integration point, which is requested by the master, uses material model class services to compute real stresses for each corresponding layer, passing the slave integration point as a parameter. Then for each slave, the material model asks the given integration point for its associated status. Having obtained reference to it, the material model can access all its history variables through status services, and computes results.

As an example, Fig. 6 shows specific details concerning implementation of a microplane model. A similar material interface to the previous one can be seen. Again, there are element, material, and integration point classes. The general **Microplane material** class, which is derived from **Material model** class, is the base class for all microplane models. It defines services required from all microplane models and implements general common services (for example stress homogenization). Other material model dependent services are left to be implemented by derived classes (for example service for computing real microplane stresses). For convenience, a **Microplane** class has been added. This class is an abstraction for microplane. Since microplane can be generally considered as an integration point, it was natural to derive this class from the **Integration point** class. A few services have been added, like returning microplane normal or its projection tensors. Further, the implementation of the microplane model — **MicroplaneModel1**, which implements services declared by the base **Microplane Model** class, is introduced. Together with this class the related **MicroplaneModel1 status** is defined to store all necessary history variables. Two important notes should be made here:

- Integration point on the macro level is represented by the **Integration point** class. Micro level is represented by **Microplane** objects, introduced by microplane model for each master integration point.
- Since **Microplane**, is derived from the **Integration point** class, it inherits its capability to contain reference to related material status.

The sketched program flow describes the situation, when real stresses are requested from the material model. When the corresponding service of general **Microplane model** class for stress homogenization is invoked, again with master integration point as a parameter (remember, integration point is a compulsory parameter of all material model services). Homogenization results in integration over all microplanes, therefore the corresponding microplane is extracted from the master integration point, and *GiveRealMicroplaneStress* service is invoked, with the corresponding **Microplane** instance as a parameter. **MicroplaneModel1** then extracts its associated status from microplane and computes results using its history variables from current microplane.

To summarize, the described program structure supports extension towards any material model with arbitrary history variables, and towards any cross section model, without modification of any part of the code.

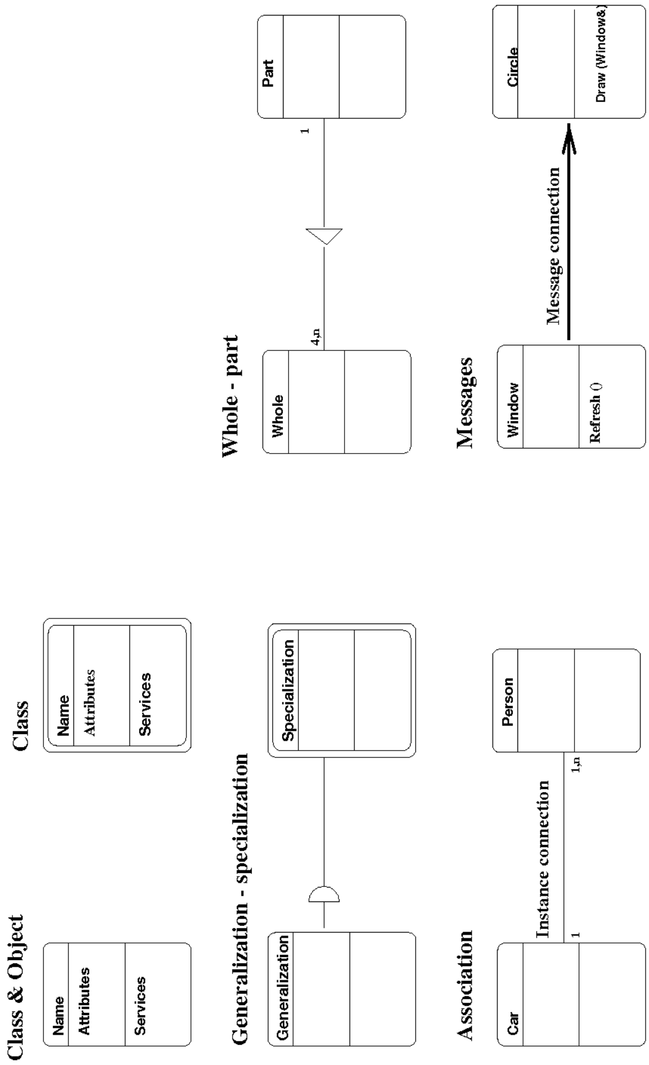

Figure 1: Coad Yourdon methodology.

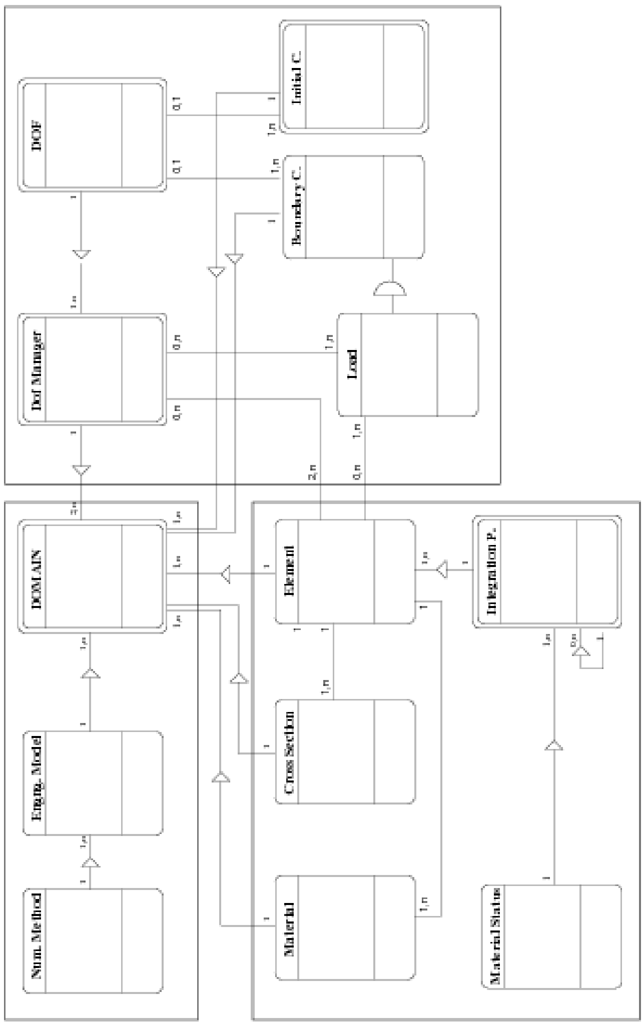

Figure 2: General Structure.

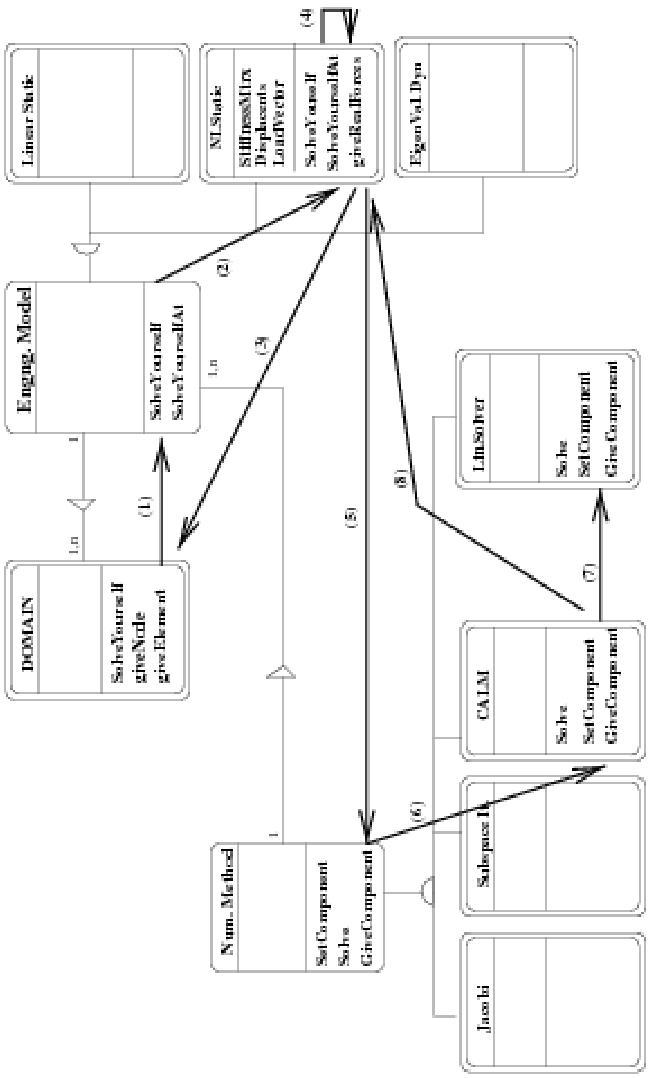

Figure 3: Engng model - Numerical method Interface.

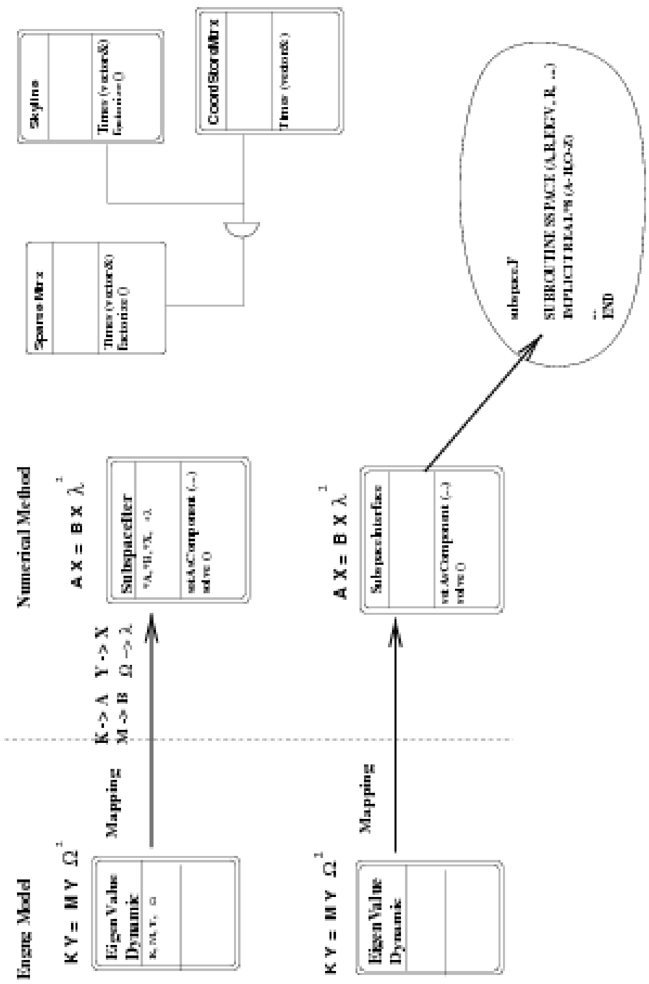

Figure 4: Engng model - Numerical method Interface.

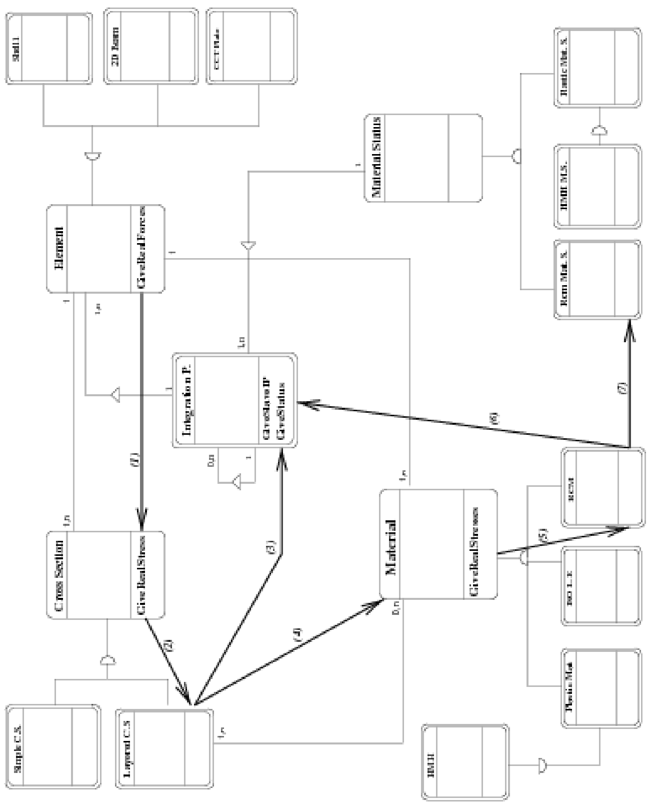

Figure 5: Element-material frame structure.

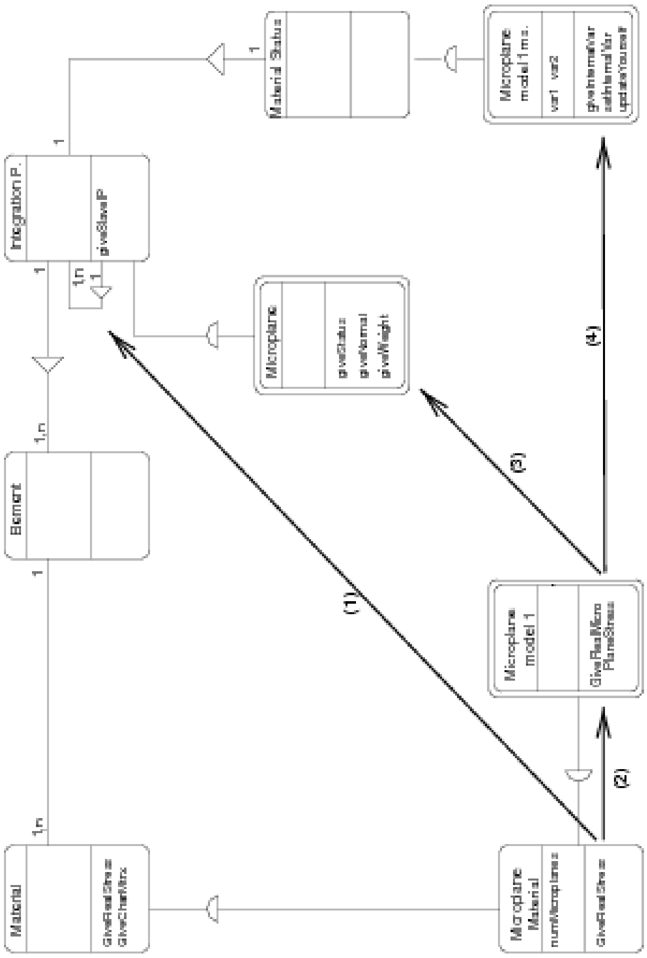

Figure 6: Example - Microplane model implementation.

6 Implementation

The proposed program structure has been successfully implemented. The C++ programming language has been chosen due to its implementation efficiency, portability, and availability. Originally, this tool has been intended to support material model development. Nevertheless, the developed tool is intensively used as computational tool, thanks to availability of implemented structural analysis module. This module covers usual linear and non-linear static and dynamic problem types. Large element and material libraries are provided, as well as an interface to a mesh generator and the possibility of graphical post-processing in X-windows. The attained computational efficiency is comparable to existing codes. Currently, effort is devoted to parallel processing support as well as to the development of new modules.

7 Conclusions

To summarize, a general object oriented environment for finite element computations has been developed. The described general structure leads to modular and extensible code design. Special attention has been focused on important aspects of material library interface design, analysis type and numerical method representations, and corresponding interface design. Successful implementation using C++ programming language verifies the designed structure and provides a robust computational tool for finite element modeling.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic - Project No.: 103/97/P106.

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